

The Art Gladiators

Who needs comic books? Meet the gonzo performers of Super Art Fight, who draw characters and creatures as they battle each other in a live competition.



From left, co-host Ross Nover, Jamie Noguchi, referee Brandon Chalmers, Jamie Baldwin and Colleen Parker during a Super Art Fight bout at Ottobar in Baltimore. (André Chung for The Washington Post)

Story by **Elizabeth Evitts Dickinson**

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On a Saturday evening in May, inside Union Stage, a music club off an alley in Southwest Washington, a hundred or so people milled about in a dark basement auditorium. They wore T-shirts with anime and comic book characters. Several young women clustered at the bar looked dressed for battle on Themyscira, the mythical island where Wonder Woman is from.

A DJ cranked up electronic music, and stage lights burned to life. Where the gear for a band would normally sit, a large wall of white paper dominated. Metal buckets filled with fat markers hung from either end. Fans corralled into what would have been the mosh pit for a better view of the night's event: the live drawing competition known as Super Art Fight.

Backstage, Jamie Noguchi readied to go on. At the first art fight in 2008, Noguchi and his buddy, Baltimore artist Nick DiFabbio, had tried to outwit each other in front of a few friends by drawing funny images and attacking the other's work. Ten years and over 200 shows later, what they created has become an amalgam of Pictionary and a WWE wrestling match with a heavy dose of improv comedy. A rotating cast of artists, many of whom are

comics illustrators like Noguchi, battle in character. There's 2 Drink Alex, known for his nerdy banter after a couple of cocktails, and Baron Von Sexyful, who looks like he stepped off the set of "Zoolander." There's a resident girl gang called the Bra'lers. And there's Stompadon, a human-size blue monster inspired by the Japanese film tradition of kaiju — think Godzilla, only lovable and with a Sharpie.

Just moments before, Noguchi had been tending to the nine other artists who would be squaring off in four competitive bouts that night, asking if they needed more pizza or a drink. Now he was transformed into his stage persona: Angry Zen Master, King of Brush Style. Clad in red and black, Noguchi sported a robot arm that he had carved from lightweight foam and adorned with layers of liquid neoprene rubber and metallic paint. It resembled the armor of a sensei cyborg. Instead of a sword, Noguchi wielded an inking brush and a jar of black Yasutomo traditional Chinese ink. His theme music blasted through speakers, and he stormed on stage to rowdy applause.

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Angry Zen Master is an amplified version of Noguchi: a kid of the Bethesda suburbs with a first-generation Chinese American mother and a Japanese American father. A comic book nerd who

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watched hours of Tokusatsu — the Japanese live-animation action films popularized in America through shows like “Mighty Morphin Power Rangers” — because it felt good seeing characters that looked like him kicking butt.

A clock ticked down from 25 minutes, the time allotted per bout, and Noguchi frantically drew as part of a tag-team challenge against two other artists. The ink flowed well on the paper, but it was hard to cover his tracks if he erred. No matter. In the heat of battle, you couldn't overthink your work. You had to draw with bold, decisive lines so that your sketches earned quick recognition and the love of the audience, who would decide the winner through applause. A few deft strokes and Noguchi made a swarm of killer bees attack his opponents' drawings.

At 41, Noguchi was several years older than many of his competitors. He's been illustrating comics for more than half his life, playing minor roles in the mammoth commercial machine of big-time publishing, coloring for places like Marvel, all the while trying to break out with a series of his own. His work has earned the kind of recognition that gets him a small page on Wikipedia and regular invitations to sit on panels at comics conventions, but not enough to let him quit his day job as a freelance cartoonist

and illustrator. At a decade in, Super Art Fight and Angry Zen Master may not make him money, but they are two of Noguchi's longest-running and most well-known creations.

To win at Super Art Fight you need many of the same skills required to succeed in the comics industry: talent, wit, outsized imagination and a storytelling prowess capable of capturing the fealty of an audience within a modicum of moves. By the end of the night, it was Noguchi and his tag-team partner who had earned the loudest applause. Noguchi let out a guttural yell as he hoisted the SAF prize belt above his head. In the world of comics, there is an endless array of heroes, villains, monsters, weapons, dastardly plans and alternate universes. But there has never been anything like Super Art Fight.





Clockwise from top: Angry Zen Master, King of Brush Style: Jamie Noguchi uses traditional Chinese ink during his Super Art Fight bouts instead of markers. He has been illustrating comics for more than half his life. Bra'lers: Jamie Baldwin, left, and Colleen Parker are a duo who fight under the names Jamie the Judge and Killer Colleen, Princess of Darkness. Baron Von Sexyful: Michael Bracco looks like he stepped off the set of "Zoolander." (Photos by André Chung for The Washington Post)

As a kid, Noguchi loved superheroes. He discovered comics when he and his younger brother, Mat, unearthed their father's childhood collection. Noguchi liked the narrative shorthand of comics, the way the visual storytelling created an imaginative spark for the reader. The gutter between the panels of illustration "delineated time, and anything could happen in that void," he said. As the reader, you got to fill in what might have happened, working in a creative symbiosis with the writer and the artist to round out the story.

Growing up, Noguchi was inspired by the traditional Chinese watercolors that his maternal grandmother would paint, and he loved to draw. His visual style developed to include strong manga and anime influences. After college, he took a full-time job as a colorist at a company that outsourced professional artists to comic book publishers. An inker would send him pages, and it was his job to plug in the color, create the shadows and add the highlights. Noguchi's work appeared in books by Marvel, DC and Dark Horse, among others. The job was meant to be a foot in the door of the industry, to lead to drawing gigs, but it never did. After two years, Noguchi quit. "I was done coloring other people's work," he said. "I wanted to make my own."

With the rise of the Internet, independent artists like Noguchi could circumvent the hurdles of print and self-publish online. One of Noguchi's earliest webcomics went online in 2005 and featured a group of his friends fighting monsters. It was effectively one long fight scene, and just as he bored of drawing it, he met a writer named Rob Balder. They collaborated and created a webcomic called "Erfworld," which Time magazine named among the top 10 graphic novels of 2007. Yet the bid to grow an audience, not just with his comics but also through convention appearances and Kickstarter campaigns, proved to be a grind. "You hear 'no' a lot in this industry," Noguchi said. "There's a lot of rejection."

“Going with the first thing that pops in your mind is kind of a trip.”

— Jamie Noguchi

Around 2006, Noguchi met Nick DiFabbio when they both were working the comics convention circuit hawking their creations. They hit it off, and soon a mutual friend was booking them for a

live event held at comics conventions called Iron Artist, an audiovisual-heavy drawing competition modeled after the hit TV show “Iron Chef.” One year, the AV equipment failed in front of a crowd of about 1,000 anime fans at an event in Baltimore, according to Marty Day, who served as emcee. Since this was the headline event, “the room was packed,” said Day, who lives in Baltimore and does improv when he’s not working at a computer-software company. “Nick and Jamie knew that it was not going as planned, and you could see the gears turning in their heads.”

They began tacking pieces of poster board together, Day said, and when they started attacking each other’s drawings — turning the nose on a face into a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle, or neutering a robot’s gun by wrapping it in a bun and making it look like a hot dog — the crowd loved it. “It was unbelievably enthralling,” Day said.

A few months later, Noguchi and DiFabbio hosted their first Super Art Fight at a Baltimore music club called Ottobar. Ross Nover, a graphic designer and illustrator, and Day were also there, and by the second show, the two of them hopped on stage to provide humorous play-by-play.

Like many successful comics, Super Art Fight became the work of a collaborative team of like-minded friends. Together, they refined the show. Each match would start with a general theme, like Aliens vs. Monsters or Obscure Superheroes. They developed a computer projection of a spinning wheel called the Wheel of Death and filled it with oddball ideas crowdsourced from fans in advance. Participants would have to incorporate these topics into their drawings every five minutes. They enticed artists from around the region to compete. Most used the supplied markers, but Noguchi “was the first one to go up there with a brush and ink,” Day said. “It’s part of him wanting to point out the more traditional implements of art, and people were amazed that he pulled it off in this very frantic environment.”

In comics, the line is king — thickness, weight, angle all inform the personality of a character or the action in a panel. A few well-placed swooshes and your hero is running. “[Noguchi] knows when to place a line, where to place it, and he knows how thick or thin it needs to be,” said Jamie Baldwin, who has competed against him since the first year of Art Fight and is a member of the Bra’lers. “His style on stage is like poetry,” she said.

The original crew took Super Art Fight on the road, piling into cars for long drives to conventions across the country and in

Canada. Sometimes 500 people showed up, sometimes 15. In the constellation of artists who helped create Super Art Fight, Noguchi found fellow nerds and outcasts, friends who snorted over the same geeky jokes and were the first in line at the latest superhero movie. He found a creative home where he didn't need to explain every reference; they just got it. Noguchi had found his people.





Clockwise from top: Mecha Impact: Chris Impink, a Super Art Fight collaborator for 10 years, wrote the code for the competition's "Wheel of Death." Red Erin: Erin Laue comes on stage with a sweet smile "and then she tears you apart with her artwork. She goes for the jugular," Noguchi says. Stompadon: Kelsey Wailes's persona is a blue creature inspired by Japan's kaiju monsters. (Photos by André Chung for The Washington Post)

On a Friday in June, the doors to Ottobar opened at 8 p.m. for the 10th anniversary show of Super Art Fight. The floor and balcony filled quickly. People wore T-shirts sporting the names of their favorite art fighters.

Noguchi went on stage first to defend his title in a tag-team match. Some competitors mentally prepped for the show by sketching ideas in advance. Noguchi preferred to wing it, playing off the other artists. You have to get over being too precious with your artwork, “which is really weird for an artist to do,” Noguchi said. “Most of the time, we’re trying our hardest to make something perfect, to make it look exactly as it does in our heads. On stage it isn’t going to look great, but it could be fun, it could be humorous. Going with the first thing that pops in your mind is kind of a trip.”

The audience went wild as soon as the Wheel of Death started to swirl, chanting, “Wheel of Death! Wheel of Death!”

Watching Noguchi draw, I could see the connective tissue of his creative thinking as it came to life: the pure joy of an idea forming and finding purchase in the conscious brain, then traveling its way to his hand, to the brush, to the page and, in a split second, transmuting into audience laughter and applause.

And yet, art is commerce. Making a living as an artist means thriving in the incessant cycle of inspiration, creation, refinement and, all too often, rejection. If the result of your creative labor is a success, you may live to create another day. And maybe you can win big enough to quit the pay-the-bills gigs once and for all and sustain your own creative industry.

A referee in a black-and-white-striped shirt lofted a decibel reader over his head as the audience yelled. The artists who earned the loudest applause were deemed the winners. “Remember: If you boo, that registers on a decibel counter, too,” Day told the crowd.

Tonight, Noguchi lost in an early round. No matter. You win, you lose, you keep showing up. But look at the crowd. They loved it. And that was the whole point, really. Something that he had helped create and stoke over a decade had filled this club. “Artists very rarely get to go on a stage and have people cheering at them, like they’re seeing their favorite band,” Noguchi said. “There’s something magical about the immediacy of that audience interaction, and I guess that’s what has fueled us for 10 years.”

The first half of the competition ended, and the artists took a break. A pop-punk band called Cowabunga Pizza Time — a play

off the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles — came on stage and kicked into a loud and raucous set. Many of the SAF fans scattered to the bar for a beer, to the merch table for a T-shirt. Some hulked in corners, the anemic glow of their phones lighting their faces.



General Stormsketch (Chris Scott) and Stompadon battle it out during a Super Art Fight event in Baltimore in June. (André Chung for The Washington Post)

Noguchi stood in the back of the bar next to Baldwin. Lately, Noguchi said, he's been staying up late after his day job to work on collaborations with two writers. He wouldn't give much detail

because both comics were being pitched to publishers. One was a sci-fi coming-of-age story centered on high school kids, the other historical fiction set in Sengoku-era Japan.

A 20-something in an anime T-shirt wended his way through the crowd. He neared Noguchi and Baldwin and stood awkwardly just outside their orbit, screwing up the courage to approach. Noguchi saw him and nodded him over. The fan shouted to be heard over the deafening wail of the band: “You guys were great!”

“Thanks, man,” Noguchi said.

The fan held out a copy of the SAF poster that Noguchi had drawn for the 10th anniversary show. It featured a Transformers-like robot crouched in battle mode on a cloud of smoke, next to a monster with a red artist’s brush for a tongue. “Would you two sign this for me?” he asked.

Noguchi beamed. “Hell yeah, we will.” He felt his pockets for a pen but came up empty. It hadn’t occurred to him that someone might want his autograph.

Elizabeth Evitts Dickinson is a writer in Baltimore.

*Super Art Fight's annual "Holiday Hootenanny" show is Dec. 15
at 8 p.m. at Ottobar, 2549 N. Howard St., Baltimore. \$15.
superartfight.com.*

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